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Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 NEAE-00 SSO-00 NSCE-00
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INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
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AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY TEHRAN
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
USMISSION USUN

C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 0407

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, IS, EG, XF
SUBJECT: HERUT CENTRAL COMMITTEE VOTE: A SET-BACK FOR BEGIN

REF: TEL AVIV 0307

1. SUMMARY: THE VOTE IN HERUT'S CENTRAL COMMITTEE FOR THE PARTY'S MINISTERIAL CANDIDATE WAS ACTUALLY A CONTEST BETWEEN SUPPORTER AND OPPONENTS OF BEGIN'S PEACE PLAN. BEGIN FELT CALLED UPON TO MAKE AN ALL-OUT EFFORT TO GET HIS CHOICE ELECTED--IN THE ABSENCE OF WHICH, HE MIGHT HAVE LOST. THE MEETING AND THE RELATIVE CLOSE VOTE HAS BEEN LABELED A WATER-SHED FOR BEGIN AND IS EXPECTED TO INFLUENCE CONFIDENTIAL

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HIS FUTURE MOVES. THE VOTE REFLECTS WIDESPREAD UNEASINESS IN THE PARTY OVER BEGIN'S PROPOSALS AND INDICATES FURTHER SIGNIFICANT CONCESSIONS WILL BE DIFFICULT FOR BEGIN AS FAR AS HIS PARTY IS CONCERNED.

END SUMMARY

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2. AS GENERALLY PREDICTED, THE JANUARY 8 MEETING OF HERUT'S CENTRAL COMMITTEE TURNED INTO A TEST OF STRENGTH OF THE PRO AND ANTI BEGIN PLAN FORCES IN THE PARTY. THE OSTENSIBLE PURPOSE OF THE MEETING WAS TO CHOOSE HERUT'S CANDIDATE FOR ONE OF TWO MINISTERS WITHOUT PROTFOLIO WHOM BEGIN IS TO APPOINT IN THE NEXT FEW DAYS. (THE LIBERAL PARTY HAD ALREADY SELECTED ITS NOMINEE, MK MOSHE MISSIM.) HOWEVER, AS IT WAS THE COMMITTEE'S FIRST MEETING SINCE THE CURRENT PEACE OFFENSIVE BEGAN, IT WAS CLOSELY WATCHED FOR AN INDICATION OF THE EXTENT OF OPPOSITION TO BEGIN'S PROPOSALS WITHIN HIS OWN PARTY. THE RESULTS WERE MORE THAN AN INDICATION; THEY AMOUNTED TO A CLEAR MESSAGE.

3. IN FACT, THE TWO CANDIDATES, HAIM LANDAU AND SHMUEL KATZ, CAME TO PERSONIFY SUPPORT AND OPPOSITION, RESPECTIVELY, TO BEGIN'S INITIATIVES. SEEN IN THAT LIGHT, THE 60 PERCENT VOTE FOR BEGIN'S CHOICE REVEALS A PARTY SPLIT ALMOST DOWN THE MIDDLE ON THE BIG ISSUE FACING THE COUNTRY. THAT BEGIN HAD TO SPEAK A SECOND TIME (IN MORE EMOTIONAL TONES THAN HIS FIRST ADDRESS) ON BEHALF OF LANDAU, INDICATED HE FEARED THE VOTE MIGHT BE CLOSE. CABINET SECRETARY ARYE NAOR TOLD THE DCM THAT WITHOUT BEGIN'S SECOND EMOTIONAL APPEAL, INCLUDING THE THREAT TO RESIGN IF KATZ WON, THE VOTE WOULD HAVE GONE THE OTHER WAY. NAOR CALLED THE MEETING A WATERSHED FOR BEGIN. FOR THE FIRST TIME THE DIMENSIONS OF HERUT OPPOSITION TO HIS PROPOSALS WERE STARKLY APPARENT TO BEGIN.
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4. IN CONVERSATION WITH AN EMBOFF IN THE KNESSET YESTERDAY (JAN 9) MK GEULA COHEN WAS REPEATEDLY INTERRUPTED BY WELL-WISHERS CONGRATULATING HER "VICTORY" THE NIGHT BEFORE. AS LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION IN HERUT TO BEGIN'S PEACE PLAN, SHE THREW HER FULL WEIGHT BEHIND KATZ'S CANDIDACY. THOUGH NOT CLAIMING VICTORY, SHE BELIEVES BAGIN'S THINKING HAS BEEN AFFECTED BY THE DEMONSTRATION OF OPPOSITION IN HERUT AND WILL BE REFLECTED IN HIS FUTURE MOVES. ASKED TO EXPLAIN THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY (168 TO 15) FOR BEGIN IN THE COMMITTEE'S VOTE ON HIS PEACE PLAN, SHE GAVE THESE FACTORS AS PARTIAL EXPLANATION: UNLIKE THE SECRET BALLOT FOR MINISTER, THE VOTE ON THE PLAN WAS OPEN AND CAME VERY LATE, LONG AFTER PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION HAD CEASED RUNNING. HERUT'S "ESTABLISH-MENT," THOSE MOST LOYAL TO BEGIN, TEND TO LIVE IN TEL AVIV (WHERE THE MEETING WAS HELD). THOSE LIVING FAR AWAY AND LESS TIMID ABOUT OPPOSING BEGIN HAD ALREADY LEFT WHEN THE VOTE CAME. SHE ALSO THOUGHT THAT MANY WHO SHIED AWAY FROM OPPOSING BEGIN OPENLY, AND KNOWING AN OPEN VOTE WAS COMING UP, TOOK THE EASY WAY OUT BY LEAVING THE MEETING, I.E., "VOTED WITH THEIR FEET,"

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5. THE TALLY INDICATES THAT THE BROAD HERUT SUPPORT GIVEN BEGIN IN THE DEC 28 KNESSET VOTE (77 TEL AVIV 11194) IS NOT NOW, AT LEAST, AN ACCURATE MEASURE OF THE OPPOSITION TO HIS PROPOSALS AMONG THE PARTY'S RANK AND FILE. PART OF THE DIFFERENCE SEEMS TO BE DUE TO A BUILD UP OF DISCONTENT AS THE PRICE INHERENT IN BEGIN'S PROPOSALS SINKS IN; ANOTHER FACTOR IS THAT BEGIN MORE EASILY CONTROLS HIS MKS IN AN OPEN VOTE THAN HIS PARTY CONSTITUENCY IN A SECRET BALLOT.

6. THE STORMY ATMOSPHERE OF THE MEETING AND THE RELATIVELY CLOSE VOTE FOR THE CANDIDATES IN A PARTY MORE USED TO AUTOMATIC AUTHORITARIAN-STYLE APPROVAL OF ITS LEADER'S DECISIONS ARE SIGNIFICANT. WE BELIEVE THAT FEW VOTES WENT TO KATZ SIMPLY BECAUSE HE WAS VIEWED AS THE MORE CAPABLE OF THE
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TWO. HERUT
MEMBERS USED THE BALLOT AS A THINLY DISGUISED MEANS OF TELLING BEGIN HE HAS GONE TOO FAR, TOO FAST. THE VOTE REFLECTED NOT SO MUCH IMPLACABLE OPPOSITION TO BEGIN'S INITIATIVES AS UNEASINESS OVER FEATURES OF HIS PROPOSALS AND RESISTANCE TO FURTHER CONCESSIONS. HIS STATEMENT AT THE MEETING THAT HE MIGHT WITHDRAW THAT PORTION OF PROPOSAL DEALING WITH SINAI SETTLEMENTS IF SADAT PERSISTS IN TALK OF TOTAL REMOVAL OF SETTLEMENTS SHOULD BE SEEN IN PART AS AN EFFORT TO APPEASE HIS PARTY CRITICS.

7. FINALLY, AND ALMOST OVERLOOKED IN DISCUSSION OF THE MEETING, IS THE FACT THAT ARIEL SHARON OPENLY BACKED KATZ, EVEN WHILE EXPRESSING SUPPORT FOR BEGIN'S PLAN. THIS SEEMS TO BE ONE MORE SIGN THAT SHARON'S STRATEGY IS TWO-PRONGED: PUBLICLY SUBSCRIBING TO BEGIN'S CONCESSIONS WHILE WORKING WITHIN GOVERNMENT COUNCILS TO CHANGE THEIR MEANING.
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